

# Richard Hooker and the shaping of the Church of England's identity: the role of Scripture, Reason and Tradition<sup>1</sup>

Carla Larouco Gomes\*

In this paper I will analyse the importance of Richard Hooker's (1554-1600) ideas in the context of Reformation, as those contributed to the definition and assertion of the Church of England's identity. I will firstly focus on a brief account of the context that underlied and influenced the author's thinking in Queen Elizabeth's reign. Secondly, I will look at how Hooker defended the Church of England's objectives and measures and justified his own personal position regarding crucial religious and political issues, by explaining the relationship between Scripture, Reason and Tradition. Therefore, it will also be necessary to understand how those differed from Puritanism on the one hand, and Catholicism on the other. Lastly, I will summarize the articulation Hooker established between his theory on Scripture, reason and tradition and the defence of the Elizabethan Reformation, characterized by a *via media* later named Anglicanism.

The Church of England officially separated from the Church of Rome when Henry VIII approved the Supremacy Act in 1534. From that period until the end of the century in Queen Elizabeth's reign, advances, setbacks and permanent changes and controversies characterized the Reformation in England. Nevertheless, amidst a climate of political and religious tensions, owing to the conflicts between rival groups, the Reformation in England at the turn of the century had important similarities to the one Henry VIII had fostered. Just like her father, not only did Elizabeth I want to maintain the independence and safety of the country, but she also fought against the contests to her sovereignty and for the assertion of her political power.

On the one hand, the Queen rejected Mary I's policies, that had had the main objective of re-establishing Catholicism after the Protestant reign of Edward VI, and carried on with the Reformation her father had given origin to; that would enable her to restate the independence from Rome (Dickens, 1978: 411-413). However, on the other hand, the Queen was determined not to accept the demands of the apologists of a radical Reformation. Most of those had been Marian exiles, who were strongly influenced by the teachings of Calvin and wished that the

---

\* CEAUL

<sup>1</sup> Paper delivered at the 30<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Associação Portuguesa de Estudos Anglo-Americanos (APEAA), which took place at the Faculty of Letters of the University of Porto between 19<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> February 2009.

Reformation in England could be developed along Calvinist lines. That would obviously imply a significant reduction in the Queen's power, as she would cease to be the Supreme Governor of the Church of England. The hierarchical organization of the Church would also be eventually replaced by a congregation of ministers that would have the right to interfere in the monarch's decisions whenever they thought the word of God was being disrespected.

Therefore, knowing that religious conformity played an important part in the country's unity, Elizabeth I could not give in to pressures from extremist religious groups. Instead, the Queen decided to adopt and follow a prudent policy, established by the Elizabethan Settlement of 1559 and the Thirty Nine Articles of 1563. Those aimed at defining conclusively the identity of the Church of England that had aspects in common with the Church of Rome and, on the other hand, defended important Protestant ideals (Smith, 1996: 31). Despite that balance, or perhaps because of it, neither Catholics nor Puritans were totally satisfied with the Queen's measures. In fact, Elizabeth I allowed the discreet worship of Catholicism, as well as the Puritans' preaching, as long as neither her authority was ever questioned nor the country's safety ever menaced.

While during the first decade of the Queen's reign Catholicism was still the dominant religion, after the 1570's the situation changed. Most Catholics' conformity to the Elizabethan Settlement caused the fading of the religion they had hoped to maintain by adopting a passive and subservient behaviour (Duffy, 1992: 593). Nonetheless, the excommunication of the Queen in 1570, together with the fear of a possible Spanish offensive, certainly emphasised the association of Catholicism to the threat to national peace. That fact undoubtedly contributed to the strengthening of the Puritan movement that had the objective of developing and pushing forward with the Reformation they believed was incomplete, in order to purify the national Church. Puritans based their arguments on the belief that not only was Scripture sufficient to guide men in all his actions, as it also imposed indisputable courses of action regarding several aspects of life. Thus, besides the intention of reorganising the Church on a Presbyterian model, Puritans also criticised the pomp of the vestments of the clergy and rejected the validity of several ceremonies and rituals because, as those were not ordained by Scripture, they contributed to the proximity between the Church of England and the Church of Rome and represented remembrances of papist superstition (Collinson, 1967: 36).

Nevertheless, Elizabeth I was fully aware that the political system defended by the apologists of Calvinism was incompatible with the Erastianism she intended to implement, which did not separate the Church from the State, and acknowledged the Queen as supreme authority of both. If the path to be tread by Reformation in England was that of patriotism, besides rejecting the authority of the Pope, the monarch could not accept the adoption of a regime created exclusively by foreign reformers. About the Reformation in England Christopher Hill (1976: 25) wrote: "The English Reformation must be seen against this background: as an assertion of English nationalism, a refusal to submit to dictation from outside."

Richard Hooker, theologian and master of the Temple Church from 1585 to 1591, believed that the Reformation in England had reached its ideal stage; for that reason, in his major work, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (1593), he defended it by explaining the advantages of adopting a moderate position and criticized the arguments of those who saw the Elizabethan Reformation as an incomplete process of purification. Even though Hooker's speech was sometimes controversial, as he questioned the validity of his opponents' arguments and did not value their demands, his objective was that of contributing to the definite ending of the country's political and religious disputes. For that reason, in the Preface of the *Laws*, Hooker suggested that a trial should be carried out, in order to test the validity of the arguments held by the groups involved in the controversy. On one side the apologists of the Elizabethan Reformation, in which Hooker was included, and on the other, those who wished to further push the process of Reformation until it reached what they thought was the ideal stage of a reformed Church.

One of the most important arguments Hooker developed to defend and settle the Church of England's moderate position was the articulation between Scripture, reason and tradition in the definition of the national Church's unique identity. Hooker affirmed that not all human actions could be determined based on alleged norms from Scripture, which contradicted the *sola scriptura* theory defended by Luther, Calvin and Cartwright, according to which everything that was not ordained by Scripture had to be rejected (*Laws*, II, 145, 149). The theologian believed that the source of disagreement was the erroneous interpretation of Law. Thus, he intended to demonstrate how the divine law, expressed in Scripture, the law of nature and the law of reason complemented each other in the guiding of human actions, as those also had distinct natures (*Laws*, II, 132).

The divine law could only be revealed by Scripture, as its main objective was to determine all things necessary to salvation, that is, the supernatural duties (*Laws*, I, 124). The law of nature ruled both the natural agents, that followed the order determined by the creator, and the voluntary agents, men, who had intellectual capabilities and also the obligation of acting according to the law of reason, that would enable them to distinguish good from evil actions (*Laws*, I, 79). Even though it was not a supplement to the divine law, reason had an extremely important role in the interpretation of the teachings contained in Scripture and in the deduction of inexplicit divine laws. Furthermore, whenever there were doubts regarding matters of faith, men could enhance their knowledge of divine things, by making use of their intellectual capacities, based on Scripture and helped by the grace of God (*Laws*, II, 178). While, on the one hand, the importance of reason did not reject the supremacy of Scripture, nor its sufficiency in things essential to salvation, on the other hand, it was opposed to the Puritans' point of view on reason as something totally useless in *regnum Christi*, as it had been corrupted by the original sin. About Scripture and reason Hooker wrote: 'Scripture indeed teacheth things above nature, things which our reason by it selfe could not reach unto. Yet those things we believe, knowing by reason that Scripture is the word of God.' (*Laws*, II, 230).

Despite the fact that there was no agreement regarding matters of faith and issues related to the spiritual life of the believer, the author defended that the main cause of controversy had to do with different views on aspects related to external religion. Richard Hooker considered the distinction between matters of faith and matters of Church polity to be fundamental. Because they were necessary to salvation, matters of faith were unchangeable and either expressed by Scripture, or assumed by reason, based on Scripture. Matters of Church polity, or Church organization, did not necessarily have to follow the guidelines of Scripture. Those belonged to the scope of Church authority, which could lawfully regulate them with the support of the word of God and according to the dictates of collective reason, that is, the verdict of the Church as a whole, and not individual reason, which Hooker ironically called 'private phancies' (*Laws*, III, 208 — 210; 236). By 'private phancies' Hooker meant the demands of the Church of England's critics, who did not accept the determinations reached by general consent, as they hoped to achieve a more complete Reformation, by attacking what they believed were papist superstitions (*Laws*, IV, 280). To Hooker, and unlike his opponents, indifferent things (*adiaphora*) did not have to remain that way and the Church had the power to take decisions as far as those were concerned. Everything that Scripture did not determine as necessary to salvation was indifferent since, as they were neither commanded nor forbidden, they belonged exclusively to the scope of decision of the Church (*Laws*, II, 154 — 155).

The form of Church polity was one of those indifferent things. Hooker defended that the visible Church embraced several churches that belonged to a large Christian community and had common duties. Moreover, those churches had to define a Church polity, in which not only the government of that society but also the organization of its spiritual duties would be included. Still, it was not obligatory or necessary to adopt the same form of organization in all Christian Churches. That way, Hooker intended to fight what he considered to be the main objective of Puritans, that of destroying the ecclesiastic organization of the Church of England and substitute it for an alternative dangerous system — Presbyterianism. The adoption of Presbyterianism in England would have negative religious and political consequences. As far as religion was concerned, Hooker explained that the Church of England was not obliged to submit to any kind of Reformation followed by other Churches, and could legitimately choose its own ecclesiastical polity. It had chosen episcopacy because it was considered the best option to England. Furthermore, as the members of the Church had different tasks, those could only be harmoniously performed if a hierarchical system was respected. From the political point of view, by defending the absence of ecclesiastical hierarchy, Presbyterianism contributed to the weakening of the notion of Law, and consequently, to the disrespect of laws themselves. In addition, it also represented a menace to the position of the Queen as supreme authority of the Church of England and to the power of State itself, as it demanded the independence of Church from State in religious matters.

Hooker did not only justify the authority of the Church in the regulation of matters related to Church Polity; the author also defended its power to establish the

most appropriate rites and ceremonies associated with the practice of religion, and explained its advantages. Most of those ceremonies represented traditions of the Church and as they were indifferent to salvation they had a flexible nature; that is, they could be considered changeable or unchangeable, depending on the context. Moreover, external worship represented by rites, ceremonies and practices, ought to be the mirror of the believer's undeniable personal dedication to God, whose magnificence required and justified the sumptuousness of the worship traditions. This argument would justify the solemnity of certain ceremonies whose value was attested by antiquity, custom and agreement within the Church, ignoring inferior judgements (*Laws*, V, 31-37; 39). Furthermore, the actions performed for the benefit of religion and faith contributed to the edification of Church and men, not only because they fostered and settled devotion, but also because they were easier to remember than words (*Laws*, IV, 273-274). Hooker did not frequently use the word "tradition" in his *Laws*, but rites, ceremonies, experience and custom instead; probably owing to the negative connotation of the word, generally associated to Catholicism. Nevertheless, he criticized the position Puritans had adopted of attacking everything the Church of England had in common with the Church of Rome and explained what he meant by tradition. About tradition the theologian wrote:

Least therefore the name of tradition should be offensive to any, consideringe how far by some it hath and is abused, wee meane by traditions ordinances made in the prime of Christian religion, established with the authority which Christ hath left to his Church for matters indifferent, and in that consideration requisite to be observed till like authoritie see just and reasonable cause to alter them (*Laws*, V, 302).

Richard Hooker contradicted the notion of *sola scriptura* held by the Puritans, that is, the idea that Scripture was the only source of rules and laws by which men had to abide. Nevertheless, despite believing that Scripture, reason and tradition were complementary, Hooker acknowledged and defended the supremacy of Scripture. Unlike the Church of Rome, he never suggested parity between tradition and Scripture and condemned the idea that tradition was also necessary to achieve salvation and to reach religious truth. As far as reason was concerned, Hooker asserted that whenever assisted by divine grace and based upon Scripture, it had a crucial role not only in leading religious matters, but also in life in society. Whatever reason determined should be considered law, when resulting from general consent as expressed by collective will represented in parliament or assemblies. Hooker's intention was to prove erroneous the two opinions that, for being extreme, represented a danger not only to the Church but also to society itself, which meant the Church of England had the authority to reject them both. About the position of the Church of England regarding Scripture, reason and tradition, Hooker wrote:

"Be it in matter of one kind [laws touching matters of order] or of the other [articles concerning doctrine], what Scripture doth plainelie deliver, to that

the first place both of credit and obedience is due; the next whereunto is whatsoever anie man can necessarily conclude by force of reason; after these the voice of the Church succeedeth." (Laws, V, 39).

From the struggle to define and fight for the identity of the Church of England against the chains of Rome and the demands of the extreme opponents to Catholicism, a new religion had emerged. It was the official religion of England: moderate, independent, unique and sustained upon three major pillars: Scripture, reason and tradition. That new protestant religion, later named Anglicanism, was characterized by a *via media* between Rome's Catholicism and its extreme opponent: radical Protestantism. The objective of the Church of England was not only to narrow the gap between extreme religious opponent groups, but also to adopt and promote whatever in their positions the Church considered true and beneficial to the English Church and society. The Elizabethan Settlement and the 39 Articles had defined not only that objective, but also the policies implemented to achieve it. Those pleased Richard Hooker, who developed a theory that contributed to gather several aspects of a way of thinking that was unique and characterized 16<sup>th</sup> century England.

Some Hooker's scholars, such as Torrance Kirby (1997: 221-222) and Nigel Atkinson (2005: xiv), though, contested the traditional association of the author to the notion of a *via media* distinctive of Anglicanism, as the term *via media* had its origin in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the Oxford Movement. Nevertheless, independently of the date of origin, and of the objective of those who used, for the first time, the controversial expression, its adoption when characterizing Hooker's theory does not necessarily imply reasons for contestation, as it merely stands as a synonym of balance, harmony, moderation and agreement. In addition, Nigel Atkinson affirmed that associating the notion of *via media* to Hooker's thinking as representative of the Elizabethan Church, would have implied the appearance of a different Protestant doctrine, which, according to Atkinson, never existed (2005: xiv). However, on the one hand, Richard Hooker as well as his contemporaries who defended the Elizabethan Settlement and the 39 Articles, did not consider the Church of England a reformed copy of the Church of Rome. The theologian did not intend to reform Rome's Catholicism and implement it in England. The Catholicism of reference to the national Church was that characteristic of Christianity that dated back from the Apostles time and therefore did not depend on the Church of Rome. On the other hand, besides being an opponent to the objectives of Puritans, Hooker's ideas and doctrine were also significantly different from those of Calvin and Luther.

Thus, the Anglican thinking of the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century that Hooker systematized in his *Laws*, had its origin in the identification and defence of the national interests. Anglicanism constituted, in opposition to Catholicism on the one hand and to Puritanism on the other, a political and religious conciliatory regime. That way, Anglicanism, characterized by a *via media*, was not only a distinctive element of the Church of England but of England herself, which had managed to



define its identity. That *Via media* itself was a Reformation, the English Reformation that the Elizabethan Settlement and the 39 Articles had defined, with the intention of defending in the first place the national interests and in the second place of asserting itself as a conciliatory regime.

### Bibliography

- ATKINSON, Nigel. 2005. *Richard Hooker and the Authority of Scripture, Tradition and Reason: Reformed Theologian of the Church of England?* Vancouver: Regent College Publishing.
- COLLINSON, Patrick. 1967. *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- DICKENS, A.G. 1978. (1967). *The English Reformation*. Rev. ed. London and Glasgow: Fontana/Collins.
- DUFFY, Eamon. 1992. *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- HILL, Christopher. 1976. *Reformation to Industrial Revolution*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- HILL, W. Speed (gen. ed.). 1977. *The Folger Library Edition of the Works of Richard Hooker*. Vols. 1 – 2. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press.  
Vol. 1. Georges Edelen (ed.). *Of The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity: Preface, Books I-IV*.  
Vol. 2. W. Speed Hill (ed.). *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity: Book V*.
- KIRBY, W. J. Torrance. 1997. 'Richard Hooker as an Apologist of the Magisterial Reformation in England'. *Richard Hooker and the Construction of Christian Community*. Ed. Arthur Stephen McGrade. Tempe, AZ: Medieval & Renaissance Text & Studies. 219 – 233.
- SMITH, Kenneth Hylson. 1996. *The Churches in England from Elizabeth I to Elizabeth II*. 3 vols. London: SCM Press.